

Cross Country Checkup

Collectively, we're grieving far more than COVID-19 deaths, say experts

'We grieve the loss of living our lives,' says grief counsellor Darcy Harris

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The pandemic is causing grief over more than just COVID-19's tragic consequences. (Shutterstock)



Amid the loss of jobs, social interactions and life milestones, experts say people are grieving more than just the tragic consequences, like death and long-term illness, of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the rising death and infection counts associated with COVID-19 can weigh heavily on people, the loss of daily routines, personal connections and expectations of safety have triggered something called collective grief.

"Grief is pretty much an undercurrent of everything we're experiencing right now," said Darcy Harris, a grief counsellor and associate professor of thanatology at King's University College at Western University in London, Ont.

"We grieve the loss of living our lives and the way our lives have been."

Since the pandemic was declared in Canada nearly a year ago, experts have [warned that it will have serious effects](#) on mental health.



From the way we do our jobs, to how we walk in the street, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of our lives. (Andrew Lee/CBC)

In a [December survey conducted](#) by the Canadian Mental Health Association, two in five Canadians self-reported that their mental health has deteriorated since last March. In the same survey, nearly a fifth of Canadians reported they had increased substance use, as a way to cope. Calls to crisis services [have also increased dramatically](#) since last year.

- [Experts warn of pandemic's deepening impact on mental health as caseloads rise](#)

Early on in the pandemic, the hope of better days following the first wave offered a light at the end of the tunnel for some Canadians, says Dr. Jackie Kinley. But in the midst of a second wave — alongside the threat of more dangerous COVID-19 variants — that hope is waning.

"What we're starting to see is people are being worn down," said Kinley, a Halifax-based psychologist and resilience expert, who warns the pandemic could have a lasting impact on Canadians' mental health.

"I really see people now feeling more numb, more detached, more demoralized."

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The B.C. resident stays active and connected to her community throughout the pandemic. 4:47

Normal world 'shattered'

While it can overlap with conditions like depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, grief is a distinct and instinctive response to loss.

"Grief is a natural human experience that we're programmed to engage in that really does help us to adapt to these life experiences that shatter the glass," said Harris.

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In daily life, people have certain expectations about their routines and safety — something experts call an "assumptive world."

They wake up, have a coffee, go to work, return home, watch TV, then go to sleep. In Canada, there is also a certain guarantee that public health systems offer a safety net from illness.

When that assumptive world is shattered — like when a pandemic changes our everyday lives and strains emergency rooms — an emotional response, like grief, is triggered and the mind begins to adapt.

What triggers our grief

Though the grief many are experiencing is considered collective, it affects every person differently.

Significant changes like the loss of a job, missing a graduation or wedding, or the inability to connect with friends and loved ones in person, can result in grief — but so can smaller, day-to-day experiences that are often taken for granted.

"When I go out and walk on the sidewalk, and I see someone come towards me and one of us steps off or steps to the side, we avoid one another in a way that is a loss," said Susan Cadell, a grief researcher and social work professor at the University of Waterloo.

"It's keeping one another safe, so there's a positive side to it. But there's also a difficult side to it ... that we've learned to avoid one another."

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Too often, perhaps because individual circumstances don't feel unique during a pandemic or because the situation seems insurmountable, grief goes unspoken, says Harris.

"We've never had, in public school growing up, Emotion 101. We don't know how to deal with emotion well," said Harris.

Cadell, who is a member of the Canadian Grief Alliance, which has called on the federal government to develop a national strategy on grief education, says developing that ability from an early age could help people better engage with grief.

- [Don't put COVID-19 grief 'on the back burner,' says therapist calling for national strategy on mourning](#)

How to build self-compassion, resilience

Vaccines do offer some promise that the pandemic will eventually come to end, but when life will return to normal is hard to say. After living nearly an entire year under pandemic stress and

restrictions, Harris says now is the time to address our collective grief, however.

"When the grief becomes too much, and we get overwhelmed with the grief, that's where things like self compassion come in," Harris explained.

Thanks to social distancing, we now rely on video calling platforms like Zoom for everything from socializing with friends to taking part in an exercise class. (Franck Fife/AFP/Getty Images)

She suggests connecting with others or, if it's comfortable, talking about emotions with someone who "gets it." Taking a walk in nature can also help people engage with the present moment and slow racing thoughts.

Others might benefit from something she calls a grief drawer.

"You put all the things that trigger you into a 'drawer' and you open it up once a day," Harris said. Then for a set period of time — she recommends starting a timer, or playing music — "you immerse yourself in all of it, feel it all."

"It's a way of feeling like you can access it, but control it a little bit as well."

- **PERSONAL ESSAY** [How running helped me get through pandemic isolation, and the grief of losing my father](#)
- **SPECIAL** [Prescription for Resilience: How Canadians are coping with COVID](#)

Building resilience — the ability to absorb stress and bounce back from it — through a practice like mindfulness is another tool that can help people weather the pandemic's mental health storm, says Kinley.

That skill, which she says helps settle and ground those who are struggling, can benefit both individuals and communities.

"We have to take care of ourselves, and if we take care of ourselves, we can be there for others."

Written by Jason Vermes with files from Menaka Raman-Wilms.

Where to get help:

Canada Suicide Prevention Service: 1-833-456-4566 (Phone) | 45645 (Text, 4 p.m. to midnight ET only) crisiservicescanada.ca

In Quebec (French): Association québécoise de prévention du suicide: 1-866-APPELLE (1-866-277-3553)

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 (Phone), Live Chat counselling at www.kidshelpphone.ca

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention: [Find a 24-hour crisis centre](#)



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